

VZCZCXRO4555  
RR RUEHROV  
DE RUEHAM #1724/01 1611501  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 091501Z JUN 08  
FM AMEMBASSY AMMAN  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2826  
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 AMMAN 001724

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [KPAL](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN JORDAN, PART 1: THE REFUGEES AND THEIR WORLD

REF: A. AMMAN 391 B. AMMAN 1466 C. AMMAN 670

11. (SBU) Note: This is the first of a four-part series of cables examining the world of Jordan's Palestinian refugee camps. Part one will focus on the different categories of refugees, and the basic structure of the camp system as it exists in Jordan. Part two will examine the isolation of the camps - how they are largely separate from Jordanian society, politics, and economics. Part three will look at the economic situation of the camps and their inhabitants, particularly in light of recent strains on Jordan's economy. Part four will examine Islamist politics and extremism in the camps. These cables are the result of focus group meetings with diverse residents of nine camps in Jordan. End Note.

12. (U) Summary: Only a small proportion of Palestinians in Jordan live in refugee camps. The ten official and three unofficial camps were founded in two waves - four during and after 1948, and nine during and after 1967. The first wave of camps have for the most part been integrated into major urban centers, while those of the second wave are often more isolated. The camps are extremely crowded. End Summary.

#### Camp Residents A Minority Of Palestinian Refugees

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13. (SBU) While refugee camps are the most visual reminder of a Palestinian presence in Jordan, the number of camp residents is a relatively small subset of the population of Palestinian-origin Jordanians. The government of Jordan does not officially collect data on country of origin, yet conventional wisdom (even among Jordanian government officials) says that a majority of Jordanians are of Palestinian origin - at least sixty percent. Depending on one's estimate, up to about half of Palestinian-origin Jordanians are registered as refugees. The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which administers aid to Palestinian refugees in Jordan and the region and runs the camps, has official figures which indicate that there are 1.9 million registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan - about one-third of the country's population. However, it is only a smaller fraction that lives in UNRWA-administered refugee camps - approximately 330,000, or just eighteen percent of the total refugee population in Jordan, by the agency's estimates.

14. (SBU) For Palestinian-origin Jordanians living outside of the camps, refugee status is a choice. Some see an official refugee designation as a political statement - a reminder to Israel (and sometimes the Government of Jordan) that the Palestinian issue has yet to be solved. Others are hoping for supposed compensation that may come in place of the right of return to a future Palestinian state - compensation that some think will go only to registered refugees (Ref A). Yet for the residents of the camps, refugee status is a necessity. Official designation as a refugee allows Palestinians to live in the camps and gives them access to all the services of UNRWA.

Who Lives in the Camps?

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¶5. (SBU) While refugees are dispersed within Jordanian society, refugee camps and their residents are far more easily defined. There are ten official UNRWA refugee camps in Jordan. Four of these camps (Zarqa, Jebel Hussein, Wahdat, and Irbid) were constructed for refugees who fled to Jordan in 1948. The residents of these camps are for the most part full Jordanian citizens. These camps are all in urban areas, and in the sixty intervening years since their founding, the cities they are located in have largely engulfed them. Contacts in these camps tend to be far more integrated into the fabric of Jordanian life than those who came later.

¶6. (SBU) Five camps (Al-Husn, Baqa'a, Hitteen, Souf, and Talbieh) were created for refugees from the "Six-Day War" of ¶1967. Many of the refugees in these camps were originally housed in camps located in the Jordan Valley - camps that were abandoned due to ongoing cross-border clashes in the period leading up to the 1970 Civil War. The camps founded in 1967 and later were built further outside the urban areas of Jordan. The sprawl is just starting to reach some of them, but they remain for the most part more isolated than the earlier camps. Residents of these camps are a mixed bag in terms of status and official disposition. The vast majority are Jordanian citizens, but there are some refugees who live in these camps who have only limited access to Jordanian government services and citizenship rights. Note: For a description of the different categories and gradations of citizenship status that Palestinians and refugees possess in Jordan, see Ref B. End Note.

¶7. (U) Jerash camp (founded 1968) is a unique case: it is populated almost exclusively by former residents of the Gaza Strip. These refugees are by definition non-Jordanians. They carry "temporary" Jordanian travel documents with two year validity that function as a laissez passer. They cannot vote, and have no access to any services (such as health care) provided by the Jordanian government. Note: There are scattered refugees from Gaza in some other camps, but generally their numbers are low. End Note.

¶8. (SBU) Beyond the officially recognized refugee camps, there are neighborhoods of several cities which house large populations of refugees, either as designated overflow areas or as unplanned concentrations. Three of these neighborhoods (in Madaba, Zarqa, and Amman) are designated by the Jordanian government as refugee camps. While UNRWA provides services to these areas in the form of schools and health centers, it does not recognize them as camps. Even more far-flung areas of Jordan have smaller concentrations of refugees which merit occasional services from UNRWA, but fail to rise to the level of camps by any definition. In all of these Palestinian concentrations, there is a mix of refugees from various eras of the conflict and different status groups.

Is it Crowded in Here, or is it Just Me?  
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¶9. (U) Refugee camps in Jordan are extremely crowded. The population density of Jordan's camps is over 11,000 people per square kilometer - over seven times the average for the Amman municipal area, which stands at 1,570 per square kilometer, and almost 170 times the population density of Jordan as a whole. In fact, the crowded nature of the camps is frequently one of the only things that distinguish them from the surrounding neighborhoods. Since the camps were built as "temporary" shelters, the buildings are often haphazardly constructed in tight spaces - a factor that contributes to high population density. A 2006 UNRWA study put the average space of refugee dwellings in the camps at just 721 square feet.

¶10. (SBU) The population density of the camps is increasing. The boundaries of the camps are fixed, and the Jordanian government has no intention to expand them (and in several cases, no room to do so). Outflow is very low - most people in the camps simply cannot afford to move, especially as real

estate prices in Jordan continue to skyrocket (Ref C). UNRWA officials told us that they are starting to think about the possibility of longer-term solutions for the housing crisis in the camps, including construction of high-rise apartment buildings that would accommodate more refugees in a smaller space. Subsequent cables in this series will examine the political and social geography of the camps.

#### The Camps: A Closer Look

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¶11. (SBU) The following are brief descriptions of Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan:

##### Baqa'a Camp

The largest and most crowded refugee camp in Jordan, Baqa'a camp is located around thirty miles northwest of Amman, near the town of Ein Basha. It was founded in 1968 as a smaller settlement, but later received larger numbers of refugees who were displaced from fighting in the nearby Jordan valley. Baqa'a Camp holds over 102,000 refugees on just 1.4 square kilometers (.87 square miles) of land. Unlike many other camps in Jordan, Baqa'a camp is not integrated into the surrounding community. The camp is currently represented in parliament by Mohammed Akel, an Islamic Action Front (IAF) member.

##### Jebel Hussein Camp

Jebel Hussein Camp is one of the oldest camps in Jordan. Founded in 1952, the camp is now well integrated into the fabric of Amman. It is on the northern side of the city, near a heavily trafficked commercial area. The camp holds over 30,000 registered refugees on .42 square kilometers (.16 square miles) of land.

##### Hitteen Camp

Hitteen Camp (aka Marka Camp, aka Schneller Camp) is located ten kilometers northeast of Amman - roughly equidistant from Amman and Zarqa. The camp was founded in 1968 on .92 square kilometers (.35 square miles) of land, and now houses over 63,000 people. The camp lies on the main thoroughfare between Amman and Zarqa, and is noticeably more crowded than the suburban neighborhoods which surround it. On the Zarqa side of the camp, there are large industrial complexes which are known for their deleterious environmental impact on the area - much of Jordan's chemicals are processed here.

##### Wahdat Camp

Wahdat Camp (aka Amman New Camp) lies on the southeastern corner of Amman, just above the older downtown area. It was founded in 1955, and lies on .48 square kilometers (.19 square miles) of land. Wahdat camp houses over 50,000 registered refugees. Like Hitteen camp, Wahdat camp is in a heavily industrial area. The district is full of auto repair shops, and consequently the air in the area is thick with fumes. Wahdat camp is the center of Amman's second electoral district, which has the distinction of being the most disproportionately under-represented district in Jordan - just four representatives for 200,000 people.

##### Al-Husn Camp

Located six miles southeast of Irbid on a crowded hillside, Husn camp was founded in 1968. It is located on .74 square kilometers (.29 square miles) of land, and houses over 27,000 people. Even though the camp is located on a major thoroughfare between Irbid and Amman, it is still relatively isolated. Farmland dominates the surrounding landscape, and passing herds of sheep are not an uncommon sight on the main streets of the camp.

##### Irbid Camp

Founded in 1951, Irbid Camp is one of the oldest refugee camp

in Jordan. The camp is also one of the smallest in Jordan: .24 square kilometers, or just .09 square miles. It houses over 25,000 refugees, and has been effectively swallowed up by the city of Irbid - only the older residents of the camp can remember a time when it was still a separate village north of the city. Today, the only marker that indicates the presence of a refugee camp is a low wall surrounding the camp's graveyard and a sudden tightening of the street pattern to fit with the increased population density of the camp in comparison to the surrounding area.

#### Souf Camp

Souf Camp is in a secluded valley north of the city of Jerash. The camp was founded in 1967 on .5 square kilometers, or .19 square miles, and houses over 21,000 refugees. It is surrounded by olive groves - the city of Jerash has yet to expand quite to the border of the camp, but this will likely happen in the coming decade. Souf camp is represented in parliament by Suleyman Al-Sa'ed, a member of the Islamic Action Front.

#### Jerash Camp

Jerash Camp was created in 1967 for refugees from the Gaza strip, and remains the primary (but not only) location of Gazan refugees, who are not entitled to Jordanian citizenship. Contacts in the camp told us that in fact, most of the residents of Jerash camp are not Gazans originally. The majority are refugees from Beersheba who fled first to Gaza in 1948, and then to Jordan in 1967. As a consequence of the peculiarities of Palestinian refugee status in Jordan, many of the stateless families in the camp have relatives who came directly to Jordan from Beersheba in 1948, and hence are entitled to full Jordanian citizenship. The camp is located five miles west of Jerash, on the road to Ajloun. Unlike many camps in Jordan, Jerash camp has clear boundaries. It has a markedly more compact feel than the surrounding area, which is mostly agricultural. The camp is located on .75 square kilometers (.29 square miles) of land, and houses over 28,000 people.

#### Zarqa Camp

Zarqa Camp is the oldest refugee camp in Jordan. Founded in 1949, the camp has since become an integrated neighborhood of Zarqa. It is located in the heart of the city, right behind the main bus station. Most of its residents are 1948 refugees with full Jordanian citizenship. It is housed on .18 square kilometers, or .06 square miles, and houses over 18,500 refugees.

#### Talbieh Camp

Talbieh Camp is near the turnoff for Queen Alia International Airport, thirty-five kilometers south of Amman. The camp houses a mixture of West Bank and some Gaza refugees, and was founded in 1968. The camp is .13 square kilometers (.05 square miles) in size, and houses 9,000 people. It is surrounded by agricultural land.

#### The "Unofficial" Camps

Three neighborhoods in Jordan receive UNRWA services, but are not considered refugee camps by the agency. These pseudo-camps are located in or near Madaba, Amman (Emir Hasan), and Zarqa (Sukhna). For example, the unofficial Sukhna camp is located about twenty minutes north of Zarqa, in an isolated patch of desert which is half camp, half East Banker village. Unlike the official camps, there is nothing to suggest the presence of a concentration of Palestinian refugees - no UNRWA office, no sudden increase in population density, no string of auto repair shops that for one reason or another seem to delineate the boundaries of the established camps. The camp residents are fully integrated into the surrounding community, and are a mix of refugees from 1948 and 1967, the West Bank and Gaza. Unlike the official camps and their problems with land ownership (see

part three), structures and property in these camps are bought and sold as in the rest of Jordan.

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